

Ephesus – Leaving Your First Love

Revelation 2:1-7

Remember what it was like when you first fell in love? That person was all you could think about; they had your total devotion, and you tingled every time they entered the room. But over time the feelings began to fade. Not that the love was no longer there, but we can go through a maturing process and the newness diminishes. During this, some people give up and walk away. Unfortunately, this can even happen to our relationship with Jesus. When we first receive Him, it is so exciting; we are filled with joy, and He is constantly on our minds. Over time we can become more accustomed to Him in our lives, and some of that newness wears off. That's when we can get into trouble.

We do not want to fall away, but neglect and other interests can creep in. As we can find ourselves distant in our earthly marriages due to neglect, so it can be the same in our heavenly marriage. If we are in this place with either relationship, it will take a deliberate choice and re-focus to get things back on track. The Bible teaches that true love (agape) is a choice and not a feeling. We can revive it by choosing to do so.

Our journey through the seven churches of Revelation begins here. The first church is Ephesus. Its scenario is what was discussed above. Although they were very faithful to do their duty unto God, they had left their first love out of neglect and a lack of focus. A husband or wife should also be doing their duties for their spouses in fulfilling the roles given them by God. But if it is only out of a sense of duty, and there is no passion or love, it will be empty and unfulfilling. Although the church at Ephesus was faithfully doing her duty for her Husband, Jesus, the passion and love were missing.

This caused the Lord to be unhappy and unfulfilled with their relationship. Ephesus means *desired*, and its very name paints a picture of a loved one. The entire point of this letter is that God desired them, but He also wanted them to desire Him. A love relationship was meant to go both ways!

Ephesus was located about 60 miles from Patmos and the first church of the seven to have received the letters from John. The churches were located on the Roman postal route in such a manner that they would have received the missives in the order written. The city was near the Mediterranean Sea and the rivers Cayster and Maeander, which carried so much silt that they were said to look like soup. They eventually deposited enough in the harbor that the city had to be relocated. Over the years, the silt extended the region an extra twenty miles between the sea and where Ephesus was originally. It was the foremost city of Asia Minor and one that Pliny (a Roman historian) called the light of Asia, being both a religious and commercial center influencing the entire known world. Located in its heart was the Temple of Diana, or Artemis, which was one of the Seven Wonders of the World, owing to the fact that it stunned the eyes with rows and rows of beautiful pillars. It doubled as the bank of Asia, and its lobby housed some of the greatest Greek works of art for all to see.

The focus of Diana worship involved great immorality. Ephesus had excessive prostitution and sexual immorality which led to even greater opportunities for corruption within the church. It was a free Roman city, a seat of Roman leadership, and a city of Roman pride due to its glory and contributing to its position as a very important city in the day this was written.

Jesus does commend them for remaining separate and not allowing anything questionable to enter in, but the influence of the worship of Diana made it a home of the magic arts or witchcraft for the mystery-cults. Paul spent three years here in ministry, and Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos visited. Timothy served as their pastor, and John himself served and ministered to them in his old age. Hence, it was a powerhouse of ministry in the early church. The problem was they began to grow cold in love towards the Lord as time went by.

In this letter and the ones to follow, God has given us a template for counseling that we will see the Lord employ when dealing with the churches. The Bible says He is *Wonderful, Counselor*, so Who better to give a model for counseling. What is the pattern we see the Lord use? First, He encourages them, then He addresses whatever needs to be corrected, and lastly, He leaves them with more encouragement. Although they had many problems, the Lord graciously goes to great measure to point out their good before addressing the bad, and then leaves them

on a positive note. It is an encouragement *sandwich*. There may be a few bitter bites, but it is wrapped in something tasty on both ends. This is the way we should be counseling as well.

We stated that Ephesus means desired, but it also comes with three additional meanings – extreme, point of death, and permitted. Each one is quite applicable. The church was *extreme* in their works for the Lord, yet they were at the *point of death* in the Spirit if they did not repent. Additionally, they would be *permitted* to partake of the Tree of Life if they repented. Their name was very descriptive of their situation.

In verse one, the Lord identifies Himself by using one of the descriptors given in chapter one. He will do the same with each of the seven churches. With each identifier, we will see the description has something to do with what He says to that particular fellowship. Whatever a church or individual needs from God, that is what He will become for them, whether in blessing or in rebuke. In this case, He is the One holding the messenger of Ephesus in His hand and walking among the lamp stands. Why is this important? The Lord is going to tell them that if they don't repent and start loving Him, He will remove their lampstand, the Holy Spirit and light of God, from their assembly. This is interesting since Ephesus was called the light of Asia. God is saying He will not remain in an emotionless and loveless environment. This is a serious and sobering idea for any church or its leadership to hear. A body without the Holy Spirit is dead and only a symbol of religion. There is no church more miserable to be a part of.

Can you imagine spending your entire life going through religious rituals in an attempt to please God, only to find out when you die that He wasn't even there? Yet Scripture tells us that is exactly what many are doing. The Pharisees and Sadducees are profound examples. The literal meaning of the language says for John to tell this to the church of Ephesus at once. Showing the sense of urgency of this message and that the Lord was telling them to deal with it right now.

The Lord says, *I know your works*, in verse two, which means, *I know with absolute cleanness your works*. God sees everything they are, they do, and their motives with absolute clarity. He includes their labor, persevering patience, refusal to put up with anything evil, and their rejection of false apostles whom they have tested and found to be liars. They were doing great when it came to keeping the church pure, but they lacked love and their hearts were far from where the Lord wanted them to be. God cares much more for where our hearts are than where our works are. This was the main problem with the church of Ephesus.

The word labor means fatigue brought on by work or exertion. In other words, they were working and laboring hard for the Lord. *Patience* is the word *hypomone*, which means staying power, to last, to endure, to remain, to persevere which speaks of their refusal to give up. They were not quitters! The word *cannot* is the word *dynamai* and means to be able or to have the capacity to do something. They were so zealous against evil that they were not able to allow it. *Evil* is the word *kakos* and refers to bad morals. They could not tolerate those who were morally evil. The word apostle is the word *apostolos* and means a messenger or representative. They were good at identifying the many false teachers and false prophets travelling around in those days.

Verse three says they had persevered with patience through persecution, and labored, and not been weary when it came to serving the Lord. They were busy in the works of God for His Name's sake, but He still was not pleased with them. It does not matter to God how busy we are with serving and church matters if our hearts are not in the right place. The phrase, *In doing all for His Name's sake*, reflects the importance of your name in Biblical days. It represented who you really were. And they labored for His Name's sake. Jesus was saying they did things His way for His sake to the point of weariness.

Now the Lord says in the next verse that even though you have done all of these great things for Me, nevertheless I have this against you – you have left your first love. There were a lot of religious works for the Lord, but those meant nothing to God because the church had stopped loving Him. Note that, to God, loving Him is our top priority. This is what the Lord wants from us more than anything else. Spending time with and loving Him are the most important things to God, yet so many of us get caught up in trying to do works for Him. This reminds me of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42.

Left is the word *aphiemi* and means to *send off, to release, or to let go*. Their problem was they had let go of their first love through simple neglect. They had neglected it and by doing so, it was gone. It is sad but true that if we disregard our relationship with the Lord it will simply fade away. The word *first* is the word *protos* and means *best*,

prominent, or most important. This is where the Lord wanted to be in their lives. Who used to be their first love? The Lord.

He could not care less about all the religious busy work, even in His Name, if we don't truly love Him. Our love for Him should be our first love. Typically, we have many different loves in our lives: a spouse, children, family, friends, and even pets. Jesus says He must be above them all, or He is not pleased. Scripture calls Jesus a jealous God. If that convicts us, if we have left our first love and let our own desires and the world crowd out the Lord in our lives, Jesus now gives the remedy to restoration.

He gives the three R's of restoration:

- **Remember**
- **Repent**
- **Re-do**

We must remember what it was like with the Lord, repent, and re-do those things we used to do before slipping away. This is needful even if you do not feel like it. Biblical love is not a feeling; it is a choice. Feelings come and go; a choice to love is forever. Remember what it was like when you were first saved? You were always reading the Bible, always praying, always in church, and always sharing with everyone in your path. Are you still doing that today? If not, it's time to go back and start all over again.

The rest of the verse tells us what will happen if we don't, and it gets scary. He says *or else*. That is typically not a good statement, especially not coming from the Lord. When He says it, look out! He says that if they don't repent, He will come quickly and remove their lamp stand from its place. Ever known churches like that? God forbid that we at Calvary Chapel ever become a religious organization that is void of the Spirit of God.

As we finish our verses, once again the Lord tells them something they are doing well and encourages them in it. They hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, and so does He. Who were the Nicolaitans? There are two possibilities, and both are applicable. In that day there was a group started by a man named Nicolaus who was influential in bringing corruption into the church by encouraging compromise with the world. He was pushing freedom in Christ so much that it was being used as an excuse to sin. The church at Ephesus was not allowing that, which was good. The other meaning includes an establishing of a hierarchy within the church. *Nico* means *priesthood*, and *laitanes* means *laity* or *the people* and has the idea of ruling over and destroying the people. It was, in essence, the establishing of a priesthood ruling over the people like the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus did away with this concept on the cross and in establishing the church. Ephesus hated it, and God hates it. He commended them for taking this stand. We see the deeds of the Nicolaitans today in many churches where the leadership rules over the people in a dictatorial and superior manner. Some groups even establish a hierarchy of priesthood leadership. God says He hates it, so it would behoove us to hate it as well.

The Lord ends by giving a warning and then a word of encouragement. He says *Let him who has ears hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. This counsel will be a benefit if we not only hear it, but then do it. He then tells them of the reward for doing it and becoming overcomers: He will give them the Tree of Life to eat from in the Paradise of God.

This language would have immediately reminded them of another place in Scripture, the Garden of Eden, in which was the tree of life. The Bible says there will once again be this tree for our enjoyment and pleasure in the Kingdom. So, in essence, the Lord was saying, if you obey Me, you will be with me in the Kingdom of God and enjoy the rewards thereof.

It is interesting in light of the fact that the temple of Diana was built on a tree shrine, and the symbol of Ephesus and the temple of Diana was a tree. It is as if God was saying, instead of the fake tree of the fake goddess, I give you the true Tree of Life in Jesus Christ.

Do you want the promise of the Tree of Life in Jesus? Then it's time to re-evaluate your love for Him. Has God convicted you about leaving your first love? If so, it's time to repent and come back. Maybe He has never been your love at all? You can change that as well.

Group Study and Personal Application Questions:

1. There is a striking parallel between the love we are to have towards Jesus and the love we are to demonstrate in a marriage. Many things can contribute to the cooling of affections towards the one we love. What do we deliberately need to do to get things back on track? What does the Bible teach that “true love” is?
2. Too often our marriage or relationship towards the Lord becomes a _____ where there is no passion or love and we find ourselves simply going through the motions.
3. What are some of the characteristics of Ephesus, in the days of John, we can see in our country or cities today? Do you see any of these in the church today?
4. The template God uses in counseling His churches with these seven letters is wisdom we can use. What three points does this template consist of?
5. V1 – One of the meanings of Ephesus is “desire” and we will see that if Ephesus does not heed the warning given to them, their lamp stand will be removed. If this happens, what or who is being removed?
6. When Jesus deals with a church or an individual, how much time is given before correction is to take place? The language John used emphasizes this.
7. V2 – Jesus said, “I know your works” which means, “I know with absoluteness clearness your works.” What does the language imply Jesus knows clearly about their works?
8. What “works” were the church in Ephesus doing well in?
9. V3 – Not only did the church in Ephesus labor intensely, but they did it “for His name’s sake.” What does this phrase reflect?
10. V4 – It must have been disheartening to Ephesus to hear the word “nevertheless”. Although they were doing great outwardly there was one thing Jesus held against them. What was it?
11. Even though we must be serving the Lord through works, what does He want above the works? Are your works standing between you and the Lord? Have they become an idol to you?
12. V5 – Jesus shows His mercy to the church of Ephesus by telling them what they must do to make things right again. What are the three R’s of restoration? Explain these.
13. Jesus uses the phrase “or else” to stress what will happen if they do not obey. What is the consequence and why is it scary?
14. V6 – We really need to take notice when the Lord says He hates something. In this case it was the deeds of the Nicolaitans? What is the meaning of Nicolaitans?
15. V7 – Hearing is not good enough. What is the other aspect of hearing that needs to be recognized?
16. What is the promise for those who would obey? What is the promise’s connection with the temple of Diana?

Maintaining that first love towards the Lord is most important. Being over-extended in works can easily crowd Him out.

- If He is not, what specific actions must you do to recapture that love?